

Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

September 11 + 1, 2017

I don't believe I've seen a plane in the sky a single time since September 11, 2001 without seeing the World Trade Center explosions all over again. Sixteen years seems like yesterday.

One of the things we humans often do after gigantic events, whether good or evil, is to create some sort of memorial of those events, "lest we forget." I've learned this week about an important memorial that is nearly complete in Montgomery, Alabama; but before I tell you about it, I must tell you that the rest of this *Laptop* is going to be very graphic and intensely troubling.



YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED

If you choose to continue,
look slowly and carefully at the pictures
on the next two pages before reading further.



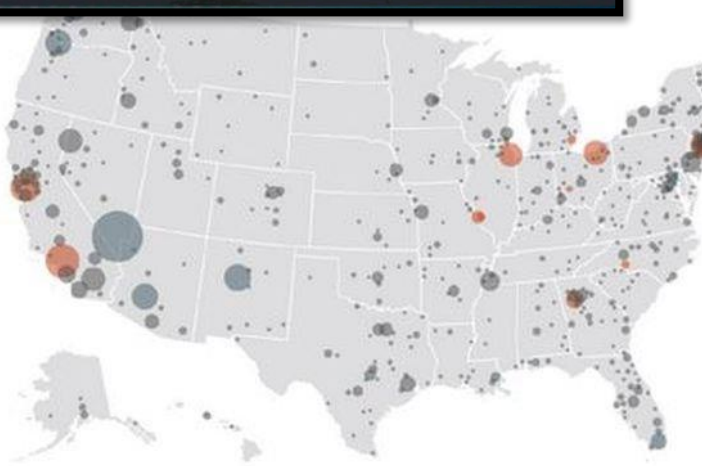
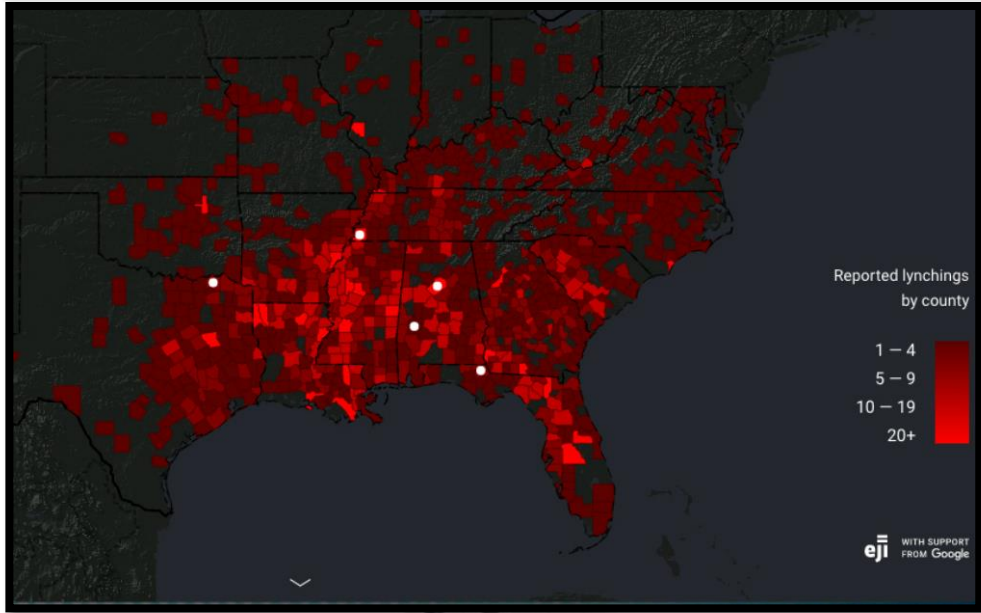
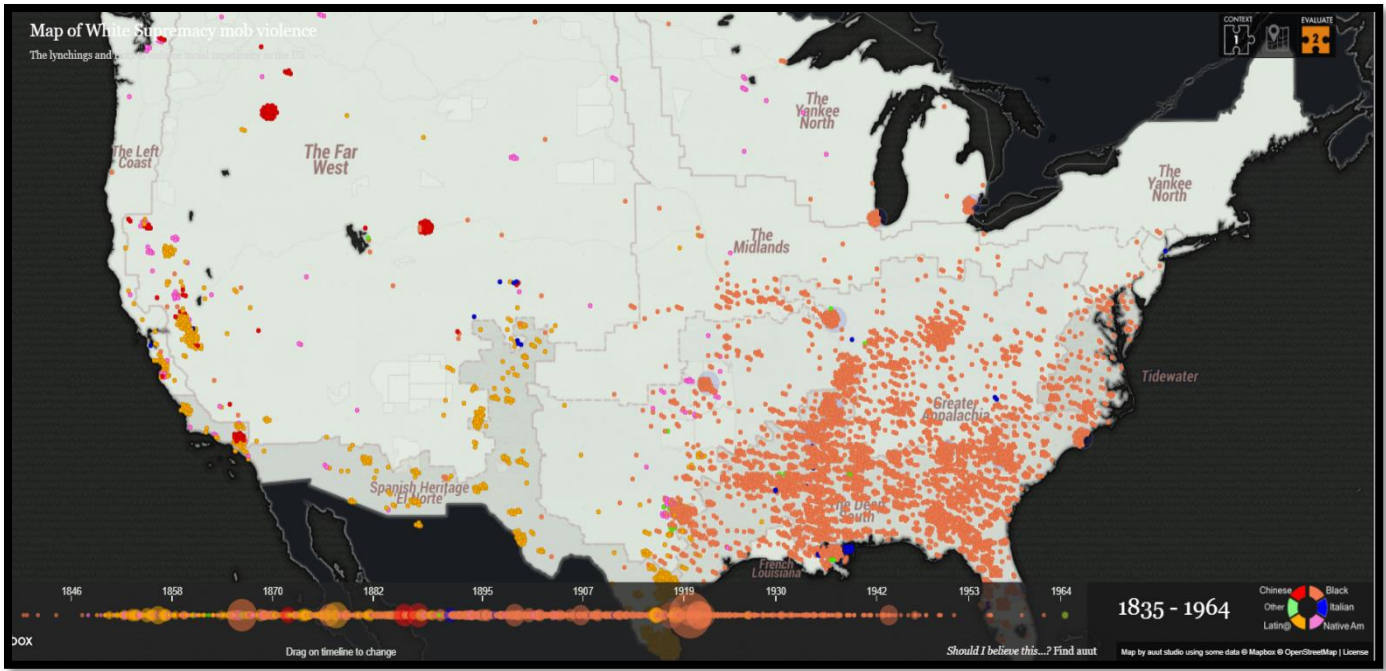


CT
CHRISTIANITY TODAY

IN MEMORY OF THESE

MORE THAN 4,000 AFRICAN AMERICANS WERE
LYNCHED AFTER SLAVERY ENDED. CAN A
MONUMENT LEAD A NATION TO REPENTANCE?

More
than
4,000.



**POLICE KILL
BLACK
AMERICANS
AT NEARLY THE
SAME RATE AS
JIM CROW ERA
LYNCHINGS.**

SOURCE:
"Mike Brown's shooting and Jim Crow lynchings have too much in common. It's time for America to own up." *The Guardian* 08/25/14
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/aug/25/mike-brown-shooting-jim-crow-lynchings-in-common>

**2000-2014 INCOMPLETE FEDERAL DATA ON POLICE KILLINGS
INSUFFICIENT FEDERAL ACTION TO STOP THEM**

Well, that wasn't any fun, was it? Our nation is currently embroiled in—among other things—a controversy about monuments and memorials: what should be memorialized, and what shouldn't?¹ Monuments and memorials are, by their very nature, interpretive. They are almost always put up after the fact, and they tell a deeper narrative, not just about the histories they are intended to commemorate but about the values a society wants to preserve. So our current debate about re-evaluating our memorials make sense, considering their power to shape and expand our understanding—or misunderstanding—of our history . . . whether good, bad, or ugly.

It will come as no surprise to some of us, and as great surprise to others of us, to learn that **between the end of the Civil War and the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, more than 4,000 African Americans were lynched in this country.** You've just looked at that map.

Lynching was a public and brutal strategy for maintaining white supremacy, frequently with the blessing of government authorities. Some argue that the practice of “the death penalty” that still endures among us has its roots in the culture of lynching.

Bryan Stevenson, an attorney who founded the **Equal Justice Initiative**,² has noted that in Berlin, “you can barely go a hundred feet without seeing a monument that’s been placed at the home of a Jewish family that was abducted,” or how actual human skulls are on display in Rwanda’s genocide museum. But in America, he says, “We don’t talk about lynching. Worse, we’ve created the counter-narrative that says we have nothing about which we should be ashamed. Our past is romantic and glorious.”

MARYLAND

Allegany	1	
Anne Arundel		5
Baltimore	1	
Calvert	1	
Carroll	1	
Frederick	3	
Harford	1	
Howard	2	
Kent	1	
Montgomery		3
Prince George's		2
Queen Anne's		1
Somerset	4	
St. Mary's	1	
Wicomico	2	

To say that Christianity has a complicated history with racial injustice in the United States—including slavery, lynchings, and anti-civil rights politics—is an enormous understatement. It’s true that Christians were often at the forefront of anti-slavery movements in 19th-century America, but it’s also true that the majority of Christians were not. Churches in the South vigorously defended the practice of slavery.³

Scripture teaches that repentance is not meant for harm but as a tool for turning from sin and walking a different path. In repenting, we acknowledge the fractures that sin has created both in our souls and in our social systems, and we commit to doing the work of repair.

“I am not interested in punishing America with this history,” Stevenson told interviewer D. L. Mayfield. “I want to liberate us. I want us to find the path that gets us to redemption. And we can’t get there if we are unwilling to give voice to the truth of our past. *Buried sins cannot be repented of.*”

¹ This *Laptop* was inspired by the lead article in the current issue of *Christianity Today*: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/september/legacy-lynching-america-christians-repentance.html>.

² <https://eji.org/reports/lynching-in-america>; <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>

³ The Southern Baptist Convention did offer an apology for racism in 1995: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1995/august1/5t9053.html>

“We don’t have many places in our country where you can have an honest experience with our history of slavery,” Stevenson noted, “and there are no spaces where you can have an honest experience with lynchings and racial terror.” So, he decided to build one.

Next summer, the Equal Justice Initiative will unveil a memorial in Montgomery, Alabama, a hub of the slave trade and a center for lynching, where visitors will be confronted with large tablets hanging from a square structure, visual reminders of more than 800 counties where lynchings took place. The visual—so *many* markers engraved with so *many* names—will transform a hill overlooking downtown Montgomery into a place of mourning and remembrance, a place to lament, and perhaps a place to offer corporate confession.



The biblical prophets frequently modeled the importance of corporate confession. Daniel confessed to sins that happened in another location, in another generation—yet he considered it important to include himself in the confession of those corporate sins: “*We and our kings, our princes and our ancestors are covered with shame, Lord, because we have sinned against you,*” he prayed (Daniel 9:8). Nehemiah was not personally present for the sins of idolatry and oppression that he confessed, but he knew that, for the sake of his people, there needed to be public acknowledgement of those sins (Nehemiah 1:4-11).

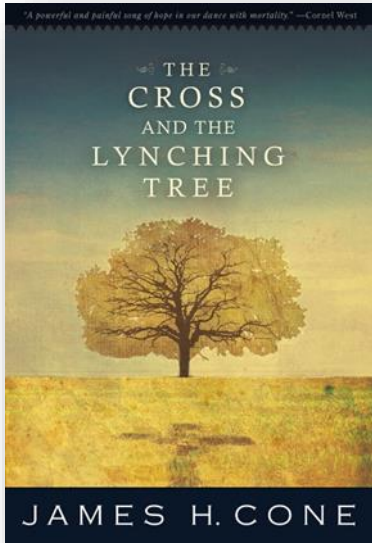
Nor is the idea that corporate sin transcends time and generation limited to the Older Testament. “*This generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world,*” Jesus told the Pharisees (Luke 11:50–51). “*Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all.*” Few of those who heard Peter preach about “*Jesus, whom you crucified*” (Acts 2:23) had been present at Golgotha, but blood-guilt was shared by them all.

The Memorial for Peace and Justice, as it will be called, will also encompass a field next to the main structure. In that field, each hanging tablet will have an identical twin resting on the ground, resembling tombstones. These markers will be placed for the counties themselves to come and to collect. Stevenson hopes that groups will travel to Montgomery, own their rightful part of lynching history, and then display it prominently back at home— “lest we forget.” If people from a particular locale choose not to claim their stone, it will remain on that Montgomery hilltop, a conspicuous sign of unacknowledged sin.

James Cone’s *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*⁴ offers significant theological reflection on lynching—which includes not just hanging, but also “burning, beating, dragging, and shooting—as well as torture, mutilation, and especially castration.” Based on significant research, Cone argues that the lynching tree is a useful symbol for reflection on the cross of Christ. According to Cone, understandings of the cross and the lynching tree can mutually

⁴ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/august-web-only/reflections-on-cross-and-lynching-tree.html>

inform one another and show how events of trauma and injustice can still inspire hope for the African American community.



Cone points out that lynching and Roman crucifixion were both extremely terrible and painful ways to die that were compounded by the additional pain of humiliation. Lynching was the “quintessential symbol of black oppression in America” while the cross was a symbol of Roman dominance, particularly reserved for insurrectionists. These horrific means of death were intended by their perpetrators to strike terror in their subject communities.

On the other hand, the cross and the lynching tree also share the common heritage of inspiring hope and vision despite the oppressors’ malign intent. Cone identifies the Cross and the lynching tree as “symbols that represent both death and the promise of redemption, judgment and the offer of mercy, suffering and the power of hope. Both the cross and the lynching tree represented the worst in human beings and at the same time ‘an unquenchable thirst’ for life that refuses to let the worst determine our final meaning.”

Bruce Fields has noted that for African Americans, Cone’s vision may also lead to the empowerment of lament and forgiveness, ideas not directly addressed in the book. The reality of lament is suggested by the parable of the servant who owed 10,000 talents (Matthew 18:24–35). This was an inconceivable debt, and there was absolutely no way that the servant could ever pay it. His master could sell him and his family as slaves to obtain some payment, but it would never be enough. Yet the master chose to forgive the debt, astronomical as it was.

The United States has accumulated a similarly astronomical debt through our racist history. Repentance for the sin of racism is certainly appropriate, but some of our crimes are of such unimaginable proportions that no real restitution can be made for them. Recognition of this reality through the biblical practice of lament may be necessary for healing to begin.

Even so, horrific as our sins may be, no gulf between us is too great to overcome, by God’s redeeming grace . . . if we tell the truth to one another, repent, and forgive.

Dave

*History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, but if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.*

MAYA ANGELOU, ON THE PULSE OF MORNING

Deuteronomy 4

⁹ Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.

to their children after them.

teach them to your children and